

SUSPENDING HOPE

Schools in Maryland and Connecticut are rethinking suspension policies and practices. They are finding that promoting positive behavior choices rather than punishing the negative is leading to higher graduation rates, especially among students of color.

BY BRIAN WILLOUGHBY ILLUSTRATION BY SEAN MCCABE

IN THE 2003–2004 ACADEMIC YEAR, Baltimore City Public Schools recorded 26,000 suspensions. Six years later, that number had dropped below 10,000, before rising last year to slightly more than 11,000.

Those figures don't necessarily surprise Jonathan Brice, officer of school support networks for this district of some 84,000 students. He is part of a community-wide team that has gained national attention for its concerted and successful efforts to rein in a disciplinary tool that was getting too much use.

"We're not as good as we need to be, but we're significantly better than we were," Brice says. "It's a cultural shift away from suspension and toward intervention and prevention. And that's a sea change."

That sea change has school districts across the country looking to Baltimore for ways to reduce the number of and the need for student suspensions. Nationally, two decades' worth of hair-trigger zero-tolerance policies have blighted the records of many students, battered graduation rates and broken trust between many struggling youths and their teachers.

Ultimately, limiting out-of-school suspensions is about two things, says John Di Donato, assistant superintendent for youth development in Bridgeport, Conn., a district that has significantly lowered its suspension rates in recent years. "It's about believing in kids, and it's about believing that adults can make a difference."

Recovering from Zero Tolerance

The dramatic rise of suspension rates can be linked to zero-tolerance policies that took root in schools in the late 1980s. Districts in several states began adopting them to address community fears of weapons and drugs in schools. They were soon expanded to punish lesser infractions, such as fighting, swearing, smoking and causing disruptions.

The Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 and the 1999 killings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., fueled the call for automatic zero-tolerance penalties for misbehavior. Occasionally, the policies were even applied to inadvertent rule breaking, such as the suspension of a Pennsylvania kindergartener who

took a toy ax to school as part of his firefighter Halloween costume.

Such policies, in large part, are why school suspensions and expulsions have doubled since the 1970s. Despite their seeming popularity, however, zero-tolerance policies have been consistently shown to reinforce rather than extinguish negative behaviors.

Once a low threshold for administrative punishment becomes part of a school's culture, it can be an easy cudgel to reach for. That is the conclusion of Pedro A. Noguera, a professor of teaching and learning at New York University. Noguera has researched the subject in multiple school districts, especially in the Northeast.

Noguera relates the following story from New Haven, Conn.: A middle school administrator began a professional development session by listing actual reasons teachers gave for sending a student to the office: *chewing gum; wearing a hat; forgetting to bring a pencil.*

The administrator then went down the list, asking the teachers whether these were legitimate reasons for sending a student to the principal's office

for punishment. In that group setting, no one could or would defend such a choice, though these were the very teachers who had made the referrals.

Baltimore's suspensions were similarly skewed. While school staff had discretion to handle discipline—in the classroom, in-building detention, etc.—the most common response was to choose out-of-school suspension. More than 60 percent of those suspensions were for minor misconduct, including classroom disruption, disrespect, lack of attendance and similar infractions.

Teachers need to be trained better to give out discipline that's proportionate to the offense, Noguera contends. "Alternatives are essential if schools are to stop using discipline as a strategy for weeding out those they deem undesirable or difficult to teach, and instead to use discipline to reconnect students to learning."

For low-income students and students of color, suspensions and other harsh punishments too often disconnect them from school. Studies have shown suspensions and expulsions are applied disproportionately to these groups, with black students frequently punished for less-severe rule violations than white students. Students of color also routinely face punishment for more subjective offenses such as showing disrespect, loitering or being too noisy, while their white counterparts face punishment for more objective infractions like vandalism or smoking.

These trends can be reversed, fortunately. In Baltimore four years ago,

the percentage of African-American male students who dropped out nearly equaled that of those who graduated—48.4 percent and 51.6 percent, respectively. By last year, with efforts to reduce suspensions ongoing, those figures shifted dramatically to 74.9 percent graduating versus 25.1 percent dropping out.

"The issue is described as reducing suspensions," Brice says, "but really the larger focus is keeping young people in school."

Bringing in the Change

How to reverse a school culture that has become too reliant on disciplinary policy and not enough on student-adult relationships? In the classroom, teachers must have the training and skills to deal with disruptive students before any disruption takes place. At the district-wide level, administrators Brice and Di Donato offer these key ingredients they believe are necessary to bring about needed change:

➤ *The effort must be district-wide and district-supported, with community connections.*

"Community will is essential," Brice says. The Baltimore effort, for example, included teachers and administrators, parents, representatives from local philanthropic groups, community-based youth-advocacy groups and other nonprofits, and government officials.

➤ *It must be a K-12 effort. Starting in middle or high school is too late.*

Positive Procedures

Raise your hand to speak.

Call other students by their given names.

Listen while others are talking.

Be seated when the bell rings.

Thinking prompts for the reflective teacher

My students' behavior is a code and it's my job to crack it.

I am the adult and I set the tone. My students' behavior is related to messages my behavior is sending.

When I respond and react to students' misbehavior in ways I don't like, it's a good time for a "gut" check.

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

Classroom routines aimed at promoting positive behavior—rather than solely discouraging negative behavior—can be very useful strategies for handling discipline in class and avoiding office referrals. Experts, supported by multiple studies, encourage the following proactive classroom-management strategies:

➤ **Maximize class structure.** Predictable routines help students find success.

➤ **Select three to five positively stated expectations that would improve the classroom.** (Arrive on time, listen attentively when someone else is speaking, etc.)

➤ **Define terms within these expectations.** "Attentively," for example, might mean hands and feet are still and eyes are focused on the speaker.

Once these expectations are finalized, post and teach them, then periodically review, model and reinforce them.

Offer pre-corrections. If silent reading time is when negative behaviors routinely happen, then introduce the routine with a reminder of the positive expectations, rather than waiting for something negative to happen.

Emphasize the positive. Any student should hear at least four (some urge six or eight or more) positive messages for every correction or negative message.

Corrections should be immediate, specific and brief. "John—please stop tapping your foot, so we can all pay attention to the presentation."

Be specific with praise. Instead of "Good job," say "I like the way you kept your hands and feet still during that presentation. Thank you for that."

Make the first contact positive—with every student, every day. Don't start with a correction.

In Bridgeport, students in early elementary grades are offered small rewards for positive behavior. Di Donato recalls a decisive moment when one fifth-grader declined the incentive. "He said, 'You don't have to give me that' because he hadn't done anything special; he was just doing the right thing to do. That student entered middle school with strong skills to be successful."

Di Donato says the district also seeks to provide a solid bridge between middle school and high school. For the first two days of school each year, all middle school guidance counselors are present on the high school campuses. The idea is to put familiar faces in place to ease incoming students into the next phase of schooling.

➤ *Discipline codes must be reviewed, adjusted and implemented uniformly and consistently.*

At Bridgeport, the former "Code of Discipline" was revised into the new "Code of Conduct." That one-word change in the title illustrates Bridgeport's shift away from solely focusing on punishing negative behaviors toward encouraging positive behaviors.

In Baltimore, the code was revised following a process that included several meetings seeking public input. The district subsequently held summer training sessions to prepare educators for its implementation that fall.

"It's the 'McDonald's plan,'" Brice says. "The French fries taste the same at any McDonald's you go to, and with 200 different schools in our district, we want our approach to discipline to be consistent and fair, no matter what school you attend."

➤ *Professional development must be part of the process.*

Both Bridgeport and Baltimore have embraced Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a broad-based approach to improving student behavior that is in place at thousands of schools

nationwide. Developed at the University of Oregon, PBIS has been proven to reduce office referral rates by up to 50 percent a year, improve

attendance and academic achievement, and reduce dropout rates. PBIS isn't learned in one professional development session. It's a school- or district-wide approach toward behavior management that needs to be practiced, refined and sustained.

Baltimore started PBIS in 30 schools and now has it operating in more than 90 schools, with plans to expand to all 200 schools in the district.

In Bridgeport, the district secured grant funding to provide PBIS-focused professional development. Di Donato describes PBIS in admittedly simplified terms: "It teaches adults to be thoughtful mentors, and it teaches young people the social skills they need to be successful."

➤ *Plans and actions must be data-driven.*

Incident numbers can help identify excessive out-of-school suspensions, and numbers can help illustrate the disproportionate impact of suspensions on students of color. Data must be part of the solution.

Weekly, data-driven meetings at individual schools allow administrators and educators to track progress and identify areas for improvement. If 12 out of 15 discipline incidents in one particular week occur in the cafeteria, for example, school leaders can focus on the need for more structure or supervision during lunch periods.

"Reviewing the data on a weekly basis causes us to ask questions," Brice says. "From these questions, we can develop intervention strategies that are more effective than they would be without the data. It also leads to solutions that can be replicated in other schools."

Tracking data also helps identify successes. At Bridgeport four years ago, the number of out-of-school suspensions was approaching 12,000. Last year, that number had been reduced by two-thirds, to about 4,000. "That's a significant drop, and it's a direct result of the work we've done," Di Donato says. "But 4,000 is still way too many." ♦

